

# Assessment of fieldwork practice: The student experience

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**Summary:** Assessment of fieldwork is common to all occupational therapy courses. This form of competency based assessment has been researched across many healthcare professions. Work on the appraisal of fieldwork assessments used by occupational therapy courses in the United Kingdom is just beginning. At the present time there appears a gap in information concerning the experience of fieldwork assessment from the student's perspective. This article seeks to address this by reporting the findings of a qualitative study of third year undergraduate occupational therapy students at University College Northampton to investigate their experience of being assessed on fieldwork.

The results showed that students expressed high levels of acceptance with the primary fieldwork assessment, the fieldwork profile. However they displayed some concern about its reliability. A major influence on the assessment process was seen to be the fieldwork educator and the supervisory relationship. In general older students appeared to have a greater degree of control over both the assessment process and the supervisory relationship. As a result of the study it would appear that a national exploration of the assessments used to assess competence of occupational therapy graduates could be beneficial to the profession.

**Key words:** fieldwork practice, assessment, students' experience, supervision

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## **Introduction**

Fieldwork is an essential element in an undergraduate occupational therapy programme, which requires assessment. Educational institutions have been responsible for designing their own methods of fieldwork assessment in recent years, which has contributed to a wide variation in the ways in which fieldwork is currently assessed (Burrows, 1989; Seale et al, 1996). Westcott and Rugg's (2001) recent survey of educational institutions in England and Ireland revealed a lack of unanimity with regard to whether fieldwork education should contribute to degree classification. When it does, wide variations in the ways in which its contribution are computed were found.

In this climate of uncertainty little is known about the students experience of being assessed. In view of the wide variety of programmes it would have been difficult to research the experiences of students across all. Rather it was decided to study the experiences of students on just one occupational therapy programme at University College Northampton (UCN) where the delivery and assessment of fieldwork education was known (Knight, 1998). Students experience four fieldwork placements on this programme, two short placements of six weeks in year one and two longer placements of ten weeks, one in year two and one in year three. All fieldwork educators attend a foundation level fieldwork education course at UCN, or an equivalent course at another occupational therapy school before supervising students. The UCN course includes an assessment grading exercise. A study day is run prior to the start of each placement, when an assessment briefing for educators new to UCN students takes place. Educators are encouraged to attend.

## **Literature review**

### **Fieldwork assessment**

The assessment of competence, with particular reference to fieldwork has been researched, both from the perspective of higher education and from health where competence to practice is a requirement to enter a health profession (for example: Brown and Knight, 1994; Salvatori, 1996). Research on the assessment of fieldwork within the domain of occupational therapy in the UK however appears limited.

### **Methods of fieldwork assessment**

Methods of assessing competence have been debated in the literature, and criterion referenced assessments have been developed and tested for reliability and validity by health care professions (for example, Bennett, 1993; Coates and Chambers, 1992; Oldmeadow, 1996). It is generally agreed that any measure of clinical competence should be objective, reliable and valid (Coates and Chambers, 1992; Salvatori, 1996; Toohey et al, 1996). This should lead to a high level of acceptance (face validity) of the assessment by students (Toohey et al, 1996). This form of assessment can have limitations. While it might be effective in assessing knowledge and skills it may be less able to assess clinical reasoning and judgement (Salvatori, 1996). It would appear more than one form of assessment of competence is desirable, for example a reflective log as well as an assessment of professional skills (Alsop and Ryan, 1996; Salvatori, 1996). However it is acknowledged that the valid and reliable assessment of clinical competence remains a challenge (Polatajko, 1994). Professional judgement is an inescapable component of the assessment process (Wolf, 1993) which is likely to lead to subjectivity (Oldmeadow, 1996; Seale et al, 1996).

It is apparent that the research and development of fieldwork assessments does not often cross professional boundaries. This appears to have led to a variety of different forms of assessment being developed independently across the health and social care professions (Coates and Chambers, 1992; Girot, 1993; Chambers, 1998). In the

mid 1980s, in occupational therapy, new assessments to measure nationally agreed standards of competence were introduced in Canada and the United States of America (Ernest, 1985; Crist and Cooper, 1988). Both assessments were evaluated for validity and reliability (Ernest and Polatajko, 1986; Crist and Cooper, 1988; and Polatajko et al, 1994). At the same time in the UK with the introduction of Diploma 81 there began a move away from a standardised national assessment of competence towards assessments designed by individual higher education institutions (Ingleton, 1988, cited in Crofts, 1991; Green, 1996). This provided UCN with the opportunity to adapt the Canadian Performance Evaluation of Occupational Therapy Students (PEOTS) for use on their course, which involved some language and skill definition changes.

Work on the appraisal of fieldwork assessment methods used by different higher education institutions within the UK is just beginning. Although all of these assessments are designed to measure the nationally agreed benchmarks of student skills required by the British College of Occupational Therapy (COT), it is likely there is variation in the way that assessments are designed and administered. The validity or reliability of any of these assessments is as yet unknown. It also appears there are wide variations in the ways in which fieldwork contributes to degree computation. This can vary between firstly grading on a pass/fail basis, secondly in the same way as academic work, or thirdly as a separate award (Alsop, 1993; Alsop and Ryan, 1996; Knight, 1998; Westcott and Rugg, 2001).

### **The student experience of assessment**

At the present moment, there appears to be a gap in information about the experience of the assessment of competence from the students' perspective. Sometimes it is referred to in studies exploring students' perspective of the fieldwork experience in general (Alexander, 1996; Heath, 1996; Martin, 1996; Thompson and Ryan, 1996; Hummell, 1997). Fieldwork itself is highly valued by students (Mitchell and Kampfe, 1990; Seale, Chapman and Davey, 2000) and still forms approximately one third of most courses

### **Factors which influence fieldwork assessment**

Many factors potentially influence the assessment of competence, several of which are embedded in the assessment process in a practice environment. Firstly, the environment itself is not constant and therefore learning opportunities and priorities will necessarily vary (Meyers, 1989; Jacobs, 1992) and each new environment can be perceived initially as threatening (Burrows, 1989). Also having learned the 'ideal' from coursework, the realities of the actual fieldwork setting could be disappointing and limiting to the student (Thompson and Ryan, 1996).

Secondly, supervisors' education in supervision skills and assessment are also likely to be important, and there is a general recognition that fieldwork educators require training in assessment (Cohn and Frum, 1988; Cross, 1992; Derdall and Urbanowski, 1995; Seale et al, 1996; Bonello, 2001). Seale et al (1996) suggest that grading case studies of hypothetical students may be an effective way of facilitating fieldwork educators' understanding of assessment issues and processes including the need for objectivity and reliability. In view of the agreed national shortage of placements it is likely that supervisors are often required to take students from more than one course (Huddleston, 1999). In this situation a thorough grounding in supervision and assessment skills is of primary importance.

Thirdly, according to the literature students and supervisors appear to consider that the supervisory relationship has an influence on fieldwork experience (Brown, 1993; Cross, 1995; Heath, 1996; Kilminster and Jolly, 2000). Christie, Joyce and Moeller (1985) assert that the quality of the supervisory relationship was perceived as a critical element of fieldwork experience for occupational therapy students. The quality of the relationship was also seen by some students to have a direct influence on the outcome of placement assessment (Waldron, 1990; Swinehart and Meyers, 1993).

The evidence suggests that supervision skills, the supervisory relationship and the learning environment have a direct influence on students' experience of fieldwork and in many cases on the assessment of fieldwork competence. Fieldwork educators, students and academics have expressed views on a variety of supervision issues, many of which may also, impact on the assessment of fieldwork competence. The literature also indicates that several elements of

students' fieldwork experience can cause them stress and anxiety, and notes the coping strategies adopted. However no literature was found which focused solely on students' perceptions concerning their experience of being assessed on fieldwork. This gap was addressed in the present study by exploring the fieldwork assessment experience of final year, undergraduate occupational therapy students at UCN. These students experience several different forms of assessment during the four fieldwork placements. Each placement provides a formative assessment to evaluate progress and a two part summative assessment in the final week. Details of all the assessments, which take place on fieldwork placement, may be found in Table 1 overleaf.

The *fieldwork profile* assesses the student's overall performance. Each skill, or competency is measured against the degree of supervision, which is required to perform a part, or the whole of the skill (Knight, 1998). The fieldwork profile, together with the student's learning objectives, is used formatively in weekly supervision throughout the placement. The supervisor at the end of the placement also completes the *profile comments form*. The supervisor is required to select five comments from 40 ranked comments that most nearly describe the student. This is intended to act as a cross reference for the level of performance achieved by the student on the fieldwork profile. It also contributes to the final grade at the end of the course. The *practical assessment* and the *client study* are stage assessments and provide an opportunity for an in depth assessment of one aspect of client related practice. Only the summative assessments contribute to the fieldwork award.

## Design

The study used a qualitative design because according to Jongbloed (2000) qualitative methods 'aim to describe the experience of people in particular settings and to understand their perspectives'. In addition it was a suitable method for exploring the complex issue of fieldwork assessment (Bowling, 2002). Data were collected from all of the students in the present study during a semi- structured interview. Open ended, broad and non directive questions were used, because they allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth individual perspective

Table 1  
Fieldwork assessment methods in use at UCN

Placement level	No. of weeks	Range of assessments	Timing	Status	Grading
Level 1A	6	Fieldwork Profile	Week 3 or 4 Week 6	Formative Summative	Assess progress Pass/fail*
		Profile Comments	Week 6	Summative	Pass/fail*
		Fieldwork Profile	Week 3 or 4 Week 6	Formative Summative	Assess progress Pass/fail*
		Profile Comments	Week 6	Summative	Pass/fail*
Level 2	10	Practical Assessment	Week 3 or 4	Summative	Pass/fail
		Fieldwork Profile	Week 5 Week 10	Formative Summative	Assess progress Pass/fail*
		Profile Comments	Week 10	Summative	Pass/fail*
		Practical Assessment	Week 8	Summative	Pass/fail
		Client Study Presentation	Week 9	Formative	Percentage
		Fieldwork Profile	Week 5 Week 10	Formative Summative	Assess progress Pass/fail*
Level 3	10	Profile Comments	Week 10	Summative	Pass/fail*
		Client Study Presentation	Week 8	Percentage	Contributes to classification

\* Contributes towards a Fieldwork Award

of the experiences of being assessed on fieldwork placement by third year occupational therapy students at UCN (Carpenter, 2000).

## **Research Sample**

Purposive sampling was chosen, as it was appropriate for qualitative research (Bowling, 2002). Twenty students were selected from a population of 49 female, final year undergraduate occupational therapy students at UCN to reflect the diversity of experiences and possibilities of the student cohort (Krefting and Krefting, 1991). Of the female students in the cohort 28, were under the age of 21 at the start of the course, and 34 were 21 and over. On this basis nine students were selected from the younger age group and eleven from the older group for the main study. Three students were used for the pilot, who were paired with three students of similar age and circumstances to allow for drop out. Following non-response or withdrawal from the study, the final sample of 17 was composed of eight students under 21 and nine students aged 21 and over.

## **Exclusion criteria**

Male students were excluded from the study, as it was unknown whether experiences may have been different for male and female students. From the few male students in the cohort (6) it would not have been possible to distinguish if gender differences had any bearing on the results. Students who had not completed all their fieldwork placements were also excluded.

## **Procedure**

Interviews, using six broad, open-ended questions generally lasted for between 35 to 45 minutes. Questions were designed to allow students to talk freely of their own experience of being assessed during their fieldwork placements. Students' general views on the experience of being assessed were sought first. The extent to which this experience



might have changed over their four placements was then explored. Helpful and unhelpful aspects of being assessed followed and finally their perception of the grading of fieldwork assessment. Notes were kept on the research process from formulating the research question through to the analysis and interpretation of the data to ensure dependability (Krefting, 1991)

### **Reflexivity**

Personal reflexivity is considered by Finlay (1998) to be essential in qualitative research requiring a continual evaluation of subjective responses. The researcher was keenly aware that the research was being undertaken from her personal perspective as a lecturer responsible for fieldwork education (Rudestam and Newton, 1992). She was aware that her subjective response to individual students during interview could influence their portrayal of their experience, and the ways that she interpreted the responses received. The language of fieldwork was familiar to the researcher and the students, but guarding against the assumption that a common language was shared was essential. It was important to acknowledge that the researcher was likely to believe in the efficacy of the method of fieldwork assessment used at UCN and the importance of the relationship between a student and their supervisor.

### **Ethical considerations**

The ethical implications of the study were considered carefully in the design of the study and strategies were adopted to ensure that ethical principles were upheld. This included:

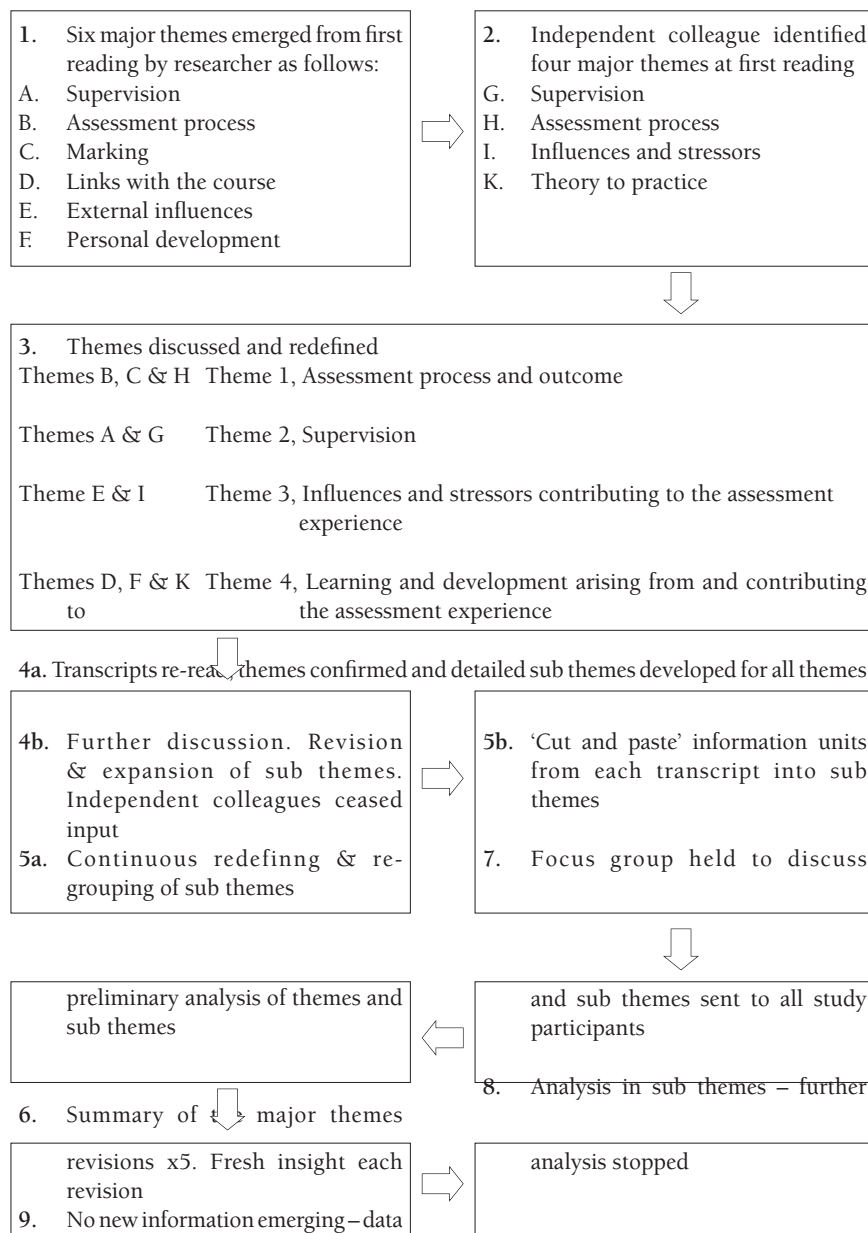
- Data were collected at UCN in the term immediately following the final fieldwork placement by the researcher. This timing was considered most appropriate because fieldwork for the students was complete and the researcher no longer had any influence over progression on the course.
- Exeter University's ethics committee approved the proposal.

- Participants were invited by letter to take part in the study, which informed of the nature and purpose of the study. The return of a signed consent form indicated willingness to participate. Confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time were assured.
- Care was taken in the interview to ensure the participants' privacy and comfort and to deal sensitively with any anxiety or distress that emerged.
- Tapes and transcripts were coded to ensure anonymity and stored securely.

## **Data analysis**

The process of qualitative data analysis moved through a data analysis spiral (Cresswell, 1998) beginning with developing six tentative codes or themes into which text could be sorted. Sub themes were created within them and the original themes were merged or redefined, resulting in 4 major themes. An independent coder was used to assist with the process up to this point in order to reduce bias and subjectivity (Krefting 1991). Detailed sub themes were developed for each theme. A further process of continuous redefining and regrouping of the sub themes took place until no new information was emerging, as can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1  
Data Analysis Flow Chart



## Results

Four major themes emerged from the qualitative analysis of the data: the assessment process, supervision, influences on assessment, and the learning that results from it. Only the results relating most directly to fieldwork assessment are presented.

### Student's views on the assessment of fieldwork practice

The structure of the assessment overall was viewed positively by the majority of students and the design of the fieldwork profile was perceived to have an educative function. The students' comments focused on the how it assisted the learning process during the course of the placement *'it was very well structured and you certainly knew what you had to aim for ...'* and *'it is very important to know your strengths and your weaknesses'*. Older students appeared to be slightly more aware of the learning opportunities associated with the fieldwork profile than younger students are. The assessment criteria used for grading were regarded as detailed and complex and whilst some students initially had difficulty learning how to use the assessment, this was generally considered an asset, *'the descriptions were good ... they were gradual steps you had to achieve'*.

Few students referred to the profile comments form, but those that did appreciated its clarity and the way the selected comments complemented the fieldwork profile. The practical assessment and the client study presentation occasioned fewer comments than the fieldwork profile. These were largely favourable and focused upon how both acted as a learning experience for the student and assisted with marking the fieldwork profile. However two students found the stress occasioned by this style of assessments intolerable. The skills of the fieldwork educator were clearly significant to students with the quality and timing of feedback on assessment being rated as important and helpful *'whether it's positive or negative ... [ it's] just helpful for your learning needs'*. In general students perceived themselves as having very little control over the assessment process at Level 1, but by the last placement they became an equal or the leader in the process. Older students perceived a greater degree of control in this respect than younger ones.

## Perceived disadvantages and advantages of the grading of the assessment

Although students appreciated the structure and design of the assessment process the grading element of the fieldwork profile received a more varied response. It was generally regarded as detailed and often complex. Some students believed that interpretation was not always clear and that the language used to explain the assessment criteria was not always easily accessible. At the same time six students were able to see the advantage of a complex and detailed assessment. They believed that grading was likely to be more accurate on the UCN assessment than on the fieldwork assessments used by other occupational therapy courses that they had encountered on placement.

*'Other schools' marking systems ... it has been commented on that ours, despite the fact that there was a lot to look at, was actually a better way of doing it because there is a definite yes or no rather than a mark on a continuum.*

If fieldwork educators lacked a comprehensive knowledge of the profile it was generally regarded as unhelpful and some believed it could have a detrimental impact on how they were marked. These students were aware that fieldwork educators were invited to attend a study day prior to the placements and felt that they should use this opportunity to become familiar with the assessment. Issues concerning perceived reliability and subjectivity were a major sub theme with all but three students referring to it.

## Reliability and subjectivity

The major concern for the younger students was fairness, whilst older students were more concerned with lack of parity between placements and the subjectivity of the assessment. Four students found the assessment on the fieldwork profile to be fair, but eight students either questioned the degree of fairness or perceived the assessment as definitely unfair. Six older students commented on the

disparity between the ways in which they were marked on different placements '*some placements marked really easy and some were quite strict*', whilst two of these students appreciated that this could lead to a lack of parity between students. Students were concerned about the subjective nature of this form of assessment and the influence of the supervisory relationship. However two students believed that it was a less subjective form of assessment than awarding percentages.

### The influence of the supervisory relationship

Students experienced this relationship in different ways. Some described it in a positive way as open and honest, or supportive and helpful, '*an open and honest relationship was the main thing*'. Sometimes the fieldwork educator was particularly welcoming and the student felt included by the team. Some also spoke of a necessary degree of trust being present. A few believed that it influenced the assessment outcome. Older students tended to describe the relationship in this way.

More negatively students also spoke of relationships, which felt authoritarian and critical '*she was quite critical ... she didn't reflect on my abilities*', or where the supervisor was demanding without being supportive '*it felt as though she was trying to catch me out*'. Sometimes students felt that fieldwork educators just kept their distance or were too busy to form anything other than a superficial relationship. On rare occasions students felt positively unwelcome either by the supervisor or the team. Younger students viewed the relationship more negatively than older students did.

It is possible the learning environment contributed to the assessment experience in terms of the degree of enthusiasm the students had for their work. Most students reflected on the positive influence this had '*[it] made me more inspired to work when I enjoyed ... the environment*'. If students found a learning environment uncomfortable it tended to decrease motivation.

## **Discussion**

### **Objectivity, reliability and validity of the assessment: the student experience**

At the present time in the UK students are assessed on fieldwork practice in different ways, based upon the somewhat ambiguous COT standards of competence (Westcott and Rugg, 2001). New national benchmarks of student skills may improve this situation. Although the form of assessment used at UCN is based upon a standardised assessment, PEOTS it has been adapted for use in this country without being retested. In terms of validity students in the present study demonstrated a positive perception of the structure and method by which they were assessed on fieldwork practice. This indicated that the fieldwork profile had face validity with a high level of acceptance. The content validity of the fieldwork profile was enhanced by UCN's adaptation of the PEOTS for use in this country although some students still appeared to find the assessment detailed and complex and the language used at times difficult to penetrate.

Inter rater reliability may pose a problem in this form of assessment (Polatajko et al, 1994; Toohey et al, 1996), because of students' awareness of their educators supervising students from different courses. The present study supported this view with students perceiving a difference in the way in which fieldwork educators on the four placements marked them. This was thought to be because they interpreted the assessment criteria in different ways, some were perceived to be generous markers whilst others were harder. In some cases students' perceptions may have been distorted when they appeared to be equating their own effort with performance outcomes. The educational package developed by Southampton (Seale et al, 1996) highlighted the importance of reliability for the fieldwork educators and it may be that a similar package could be used at UCN

It is generally recognised that assessment of practice is by nature subjective (Alsop and Ryan, 1996; Seale et al, 1996). This was also recognised by students in the present study although there was also some appreciation that the UCN fieldwork assessment might be less subjective than those used by other Universities. The perception was that the structure and design of the assessment allowed for a greater

degree of objectivity and accuracy in marking than was evidenced through their comparisons with students from other courses.

### **Supporting the fieldwork educator**

Assessing students requires fieldwork educators to have detailed knowledge of the assessment and be skilled in its administration (Derdall and Urbanowski, 1995; Seale et al, 1996; Bonello, 2001). Students in the present study supported this view and generally felt that a lack of knowledge could have a detrimental impact on the way they were marked. It was also notable that younger students felt themselves to be more vulnerable in the assessment process than older students who were more able to take control of the process. Bonello (2001), and Westcott and Rugg (2001) argue that more resources are needed from higher education to support the development and training needs of fieldwork educators. It is possible that the difficulty might not only lie with a lack of resources within higher education, but also on the priority clinicians are able to give to it. Another consideration might be that because clinicians are frequently asked to take on students from more than one institution high, possibly unrealistic demands are placed upon them. Whilst there remains such a wide variation in the ways in which fieldwork is assessed this could remain a problem.

### **Factors which may influence the assessment experience**

It is generally accepted that the supervisory relationship has a critical influence on fieldwork experience, as highlighted by (Kilminster and Jolly, 2000). Within occupational therapy it has already been demonstrated that some students perceive the quality of the relationship to have a direct influence on assessment outcomes (Swinehart and Meyers, 1993). Students in the present study overwhelmingly demonstrated that the supervisory relationship is a pivotal feature in the assessment process and some supported the view that it influenced assessment outcome. The differences between the views of older and younger students perhaps suggests that again



older students perceived themselves to have a greater sense of control over the relationship than younger students. This would allow them to create a relationship, which was effective and beneficial to them. It follows that younger students are likely to need empowerment by the fieldwork educator in order to form similar effective relationships.

It would appear that the learning environment also had an influence on assessment outcomes as students were motivated to perform well in environments that they enjoyed. Factors that contributed to this included the nature of the work, the client group, the resources available, orientation to student learning and the nature of the team and its willingness to welcome and include temporary members. Again this places further demands upon fieldwork educators who may themselves require support both from work colleagues and higher education to create optimal learning conditions.

## **Conclusion**

UCN's method of assessment had a high level of acceptance with students. Undoubtedly, the UCN assessment measure could be improved, particularly to make it more sensitive to assessment in different specialist areas. Benchmark statements of student skills will be used in the new assessment, which will ensure an improvement in clarity of language and relevance to the profession today. In addition, further training based on the grading of hypothetical student case studies using the UCN assessment could be provided.

The quality of the supervisory relationship is essential in the assessment of competence. Whilst forming an effective relationship is not a skill that is easily learned, it is one that should be promoted on fieldwork education courses for supervisors. Supervisors need to be aware that younger students may have more difficulty in forming effective relationships than older ones and may require greater empowerment by their supervisors. Equally supervisors need to be knowledgeable and confident about the assessment they use and not just the assessment process in general. Every effort needs to be made, both by placements and universities, to ensure that training in the appropriate assessment reaches every supervisor.

However, in view of the fact that assessing competence is vital to maintaining professional standards and credibility, it might be appropriate to review the assessment of competence on a wider, national basis. Whilst all occupational therapy courses work to nationally agreed benchmarks of student skills there remain issues related firstly to the wide variation in the way students are assessed and secondly how, or indeed if, fieldwork assessment contributes to degree computation. Fieldwork has many stakeholders including students, fieldwork educators, lecturers, universities, confederations, COT and the Higher Education Quality Assurance Agency. In this climate it is possible that the pressures of some stakeholders and local circumstances may detrimentally circumscribe professional and academic freedom relating to the design of fieldwork assessment. It may be wise therefore for the profession to lead the way in a national debate on assessing student skills.

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